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ABSTRACT

Recent studies suggest that the involvement of parents and teachers with young children provides natural opportunities for modeling and nurturing positive cultural attitudes. Strategies that support children's multicultural learning within a context of family involvement are of three types. The first of these is parent education and support. Teachers can support parents by holding orientation meetings to discuss multicultural curricula, sharing multicultural information, and helping parents find resources. The second strategy involves school-family curriculum activities. Activities and resources for children, parents, and teachers include study groups on cultural issues, field trips, the use of materials from various cultures in the classroom, multicultural displays, and original books created by children and their families. Multicultural resources and activities specifically for children include family stories written by children and their parents, children's literature that exhibits a multicultural perspective, storytelling by adults to children, videotapes, audiocassettes, and music produced by children themselves. The third strategy relates to parent-teacher partnerships. Parents can participate in establishing multicultural guidelines for the curriculum and can serve as resource persons for teachers. Teachers can share with families items such as books and videotapes that have a multicultural focus. Using these strategies, families and teachers can prepare children to become sensitive members of a multicultural community. (BC)

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Family Involvement in Early Multicultural Learning

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Research supports the idea that children's early childhood experiences are powerful in influencing their cultural understandings (Banks, 1993). Children develop ideas about racial identity and the attributes of cultural groups other than their own as early as three years of age (Banks, 1993). Equally significant, children begin their development of self-understanding (inclusive of their cultural identity) at birth. Self-understanding is constructed from experiences with others, mainly parents, but certainly including caregivers and teachers and significant kin and friends (Rossi & Rossi, 1990).

Recent studies suggest that the intimate involvement of parents and teachers with young children provides natural opportunities for modeling, guiding, and nurturing positive racial, ethnic, and cultural attitudes and perspectives. Fostering young children's multicultural understanding can be accomplished naturally through family involvement in children's care and education on several levels.

Strategies that support children's multicultural learning within a context of family involvement fall into three categories: parent education and support, school-family curriculum activities, and teacher-parent partnership efforts (Banks, 1993; Swick & Graves, 1993).

Parent Education and Support

Enlisting parents' help in identifying appropriate and meaningful goals and activities for family involvement in multicultural education is a first step. Teachers can involve parents by holding orientation meetings for parents in which the importance of the multicultural focus of the curriculum is explained. They can share multicultural information with parents through a lending library of books, articles, and videos; bulletin boards of events, ideas, and suggestions; parenting programs; and newsletters. "Anti-bias alerts" can warn parents about upcoming television programs that may present cultural groups in inaccurate ways (Derman-Sparks, 1989). Other steps include supporting parents in their efforts to find resources and activities by fostering in parents the need for pride in their family and their ethnic and racial heritage.

Parent and family involvement strategies need to support parents in gaining confidence and competence in their modeling and teaching roles (Swick, 1987). Children look to their parents or guardians for examples of how to relate to people who are different from themselves. Parents need positive support for their efforts to intentionally function as multicultural role models (Byrnes, 1992).

School-Family Curriculum

The diversity of cultures in the classroom is a natural starting point for increasing children's multicultural awareness. Activities that can increase both parents' *and* children's multicultural awareness include study and discussion groups on racial or cultural issues; events in which parents—as well as teachers and children—celebrate their cultural diversity; and parent participation in specific classroom curriculum activities (Ramsey & Derman-Sparks, 1992). Concrete activities in which parents and other family members can take part, such as field trips and classroom presentations, should include a time for discussion in which children can ask questions and explore their concerns and ideas (Neugebauer, 1992). Helping children have positive interactions with people from other cultures is critical to their formation of sensitive and supportive perceptions of others.

Using interesting and appropriate materials in classrooms is another way of fostering children's awareness (Byrnes, 1992). For example, *props* such as containers of hair products for men and women from various cultures can stimulate discussion about similarities and differences among people. Activities such as eating can be represented for different cultures (Neugebauer, 1992).

Byrnes (1992) suggests that *displays* throughout the classroom should include representations of people from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds engaged in meaningful activities. These displays can include family photos, original work by the children in the class, and contributions from children's parents and peers.

Original class books, including class directories, friendship or family books, activity books focused on field trips, and "profiles" of class guests, enrich the school-family curriculum (Neugebauer, 1992). Children can create original books by gathering photographs or making drawings, writing or dictating texts, and binding these materials in some way. Such projects are most effective when family members create the book together. Art, drama, music, dance, and writing are other ways of fostering children's positive attitudes toward others.

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Parent-Teacher Partnerships

Joint efforts by parents and teachers are the natural starting point for building a family-school program. Parents can participate in establishing multicultural guidelines for curriculum and instruction activities (Banks, 1993). Classroom study teams, school advisory groups, and multicultural planning sessions are some avenues that assure parents' input in policy (Ramsey & Derman-Sparks, 1992).

The role of parents as resource persons is a familiar one to teachers, who can ask families to share cultural items like magazine pictures, family recipes, dramatic play props, family experiences, stories, and artifacts. Teachers can also be a powerful resource for multicultural learning at home. Teachers can share with families items such as books, videotapes, and child-made materials. Teachers should focus on integrating the learning to be derived from these materials with families' literacy and cultural growth. Summer reading lists, special public library learning centers, and community cultural fairs are ways to extend and reinforce this process.

Multicultural Resources

There are many types of activities and resources that can enhance children's multicultural learning. *Family stories*, written by children and parents about themselves as families and shared in the classroom, can stimulate tremendous growth and sensitivity. Such stories might include historical anecdotes about ancestors, accounts of family struggles, and humorous incidents. Good *children's literature* that is set in various places and situations supports the development of multicultural perspectives (Boutte & McCormick, 1992). Good children's literature addresses real problems and can be used as a basis for classroom discussion. Relating literature to concrete activities such as performing drama and making artifacts is essential.

Children respond enthusiastically to *storytelling* by parents, grandparents, neighbors, and teachers. Crary, in Neugebauer (1992, p.11-15), suggests that adults can tell stories about their culture and its development, and about struggles to achieve respect in their community. Such stories should be related to children's interest, developmental level, and cultural context. *Videotapes*, sometimes accompanied by companion books, provide a means for enhancing children's cultural understandings.

Music and drama, either recorded or produced by the children themselves, are effective for supporting children's multicultural development. Families and teachers can use *field trips* to enrich children's ethnic, racial, and cultural understanding. Visits to local restaurants, museums, workplaces, churches, and government facilities offer beginning points for learning about community diversity.

Conclusion

Preparing children to be sensitive members of a multicultural community is a great challenge. Families and teachers can prepare the foundation for this sensitivity by creating family-school learning experiences in the early years that enable children to understand and appreciate the value of cultural diversity.

This digest was adapted from: Swick, Kevin J., Gloria Boutte, and Irma van Scoy. (1994). Multicultural Learning through Family Involvement. *Dimensions* 22(4, Summer): 17-21. EJ 488 475.

For More Information

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